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Benjamin Netanyahu's Long Premiership and the Rise of the New Political Center:

Is there a Qualitative Change in the Israeli Party System?

Abstract: Israel's party system has been characterized by the bipolar rivalry between the left-wing and right-wing blocks since the late 1970s. In recent years we could have seen at least two trends that seem to diverge from this model. For the last 9 years the Likud party has formed three successive governments which has made Benjamin Netanyahu the longest continuously serving prime minister in the history of Israel. Another new occurrence is the preservation of a significant representation of the center parties for four Knesset terms in the row. The aim of the paper is to verify whether Israel's party system has departed from the two-blocs bipolar model. Based on the empirical data (election results, government formation, party's political platforms) it examines whether the parties' rivalry in the years 2009–2018 differed qualitatively from the previous period. To answer this question the paper investigates three hypotheses. First – Likud has become a dominant party in Israel. Second – a dominant and stable Israeli right-wing parties' bloc has formed. Third – an enduring and relevant center sector has emerged in Israel's party system.

Keywords: *Likud; Israel; party system; center; right-wing; left-wing*

Introduction

The history of the Israeli party system can be divided into at least two phases. During the first one (1948–77), socialist Mapai (and its successors) was the dominant party winning every parliamentary election. It formed all the governing coalitions and secured the post of prime minister until 1977. The elections of that year introduced the second phase which was characterized by the competition between two major parties of similar size. Two political blocs (left- and right-wing) formed around these parties (Arian & Shamir 2001, pp. 693–694).

The fairly balanced rivalry of two blocs each gathering around 50% of the votes lasted until the end of 1990s. The turn of century brought another change. First, the left-wing

camp lost its previous position and its share of Knesset seats contracted. Second, new parties occupying the center of the political scene appeared. What has brought even more attention was the success of Likud's leader Benjamin Netanyahu. His continuous premiership that started in 2009 is the longest in Israel's history, surpassing the duration of David Ben Gurion's tenure. Filling the position of prime minister by Likud three times in a row was an achievement that has brought forth claims that there is a clear dominance of a right-wing party or a bloc in the Israeli party system. The paper's aim is to verify this common perception and tell whether we can really distinguish the third phase in the evolution of the parties' rivalry in Israel or does the model of balanced bipolar competition (two blocs led by two major parties) still correctly describe the Israeli party system.

There are studies dealing with the current transformation of the party system in Israel, but they do not provide a comprehensive examination of the bipolar rivalry model's validity in recent years. Some works from the 1990s and early 21st century put too much emphasis on the direct prime minister elections which proved to be a short-lived experiment (Arian & Shamir 2001). Some scholars focus on the leader of Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu, contending that his skills or campaign strategy is the reason of the party's success (Abulof 2014; Ben-Porat, 2005; Navot & Rubin 2016). Others point to the changes in Israelis' identity. Society becomes more conservative, religious and/or nationalistic strengthening the right-wing bloc (Peled 2011; Ram 2008; Kimmerling 1999; Ben-Porat 2011; Perliger, Zaidise 2015, p. 206; Orkibi 2016, p. 575). Alternatively, Diskin (2010) interprets Likud's victory in 2009 as an effect of the party's steering towards the center of the political scene. Others try to explain Likud's strength by examining the roots of its contenders decline (Israel Labour Party – Inbar 2010; Lebel & Hatuka 2016, and center parties – Lim 2009). Kenig and Tuttnauer (2017) focus on the general decline of the large mainstream parties.

The academic debate revolves primarily around the attempt to explain the success of Likud. What is lacking is the actual assessment of its scope and presentation of empirical data corroborating the party system's transformation. Noting the three consecutive terms of Likud's leader as a prime minister is not enough to prove the qualitative change to the system. And the phenomenon is not new. Yitzhak Shamir formed three successive governments in the years 1986–92.

In order to accurately describe the current form of the party system in Israel and examine whether it has moved away from the previous bipolar rivalry model, three hypotheses will be assessed:

- I. Likud has become a dominant party in Israel.
- II. A dominant and stable Israeli right-wing parties' bloc has formed.
- III. An enduring and relevant center sector has emerged in Israel's party system.

Validation of the two former hypotheses would lead to the conclusion that the party system of Israel has lost its bipolar balance and moved into unipolarism with a clear hegemony. Confirmation of the third hypothesis would imply creation of the classic tripolar, left-center-right party system, either balanced or imbalanced.

The hypotheses testing will be based mainly on the analysis of the Israeli parties' election results¹ and their coalition potential. The basic comparison of the number of obtained seats will be complemented by the three additional analytical instruments. First of them is the effective number of parties (ENP) index. It will be calculated according to the formula developed by Golosov (2010) which is a corrected version of the model designed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). The index reflects not only the sheer number of parties that got to the parliament, but also their relative strength. It is a sum of the weighted values of all the parties that entered parliament. The weighed value is 1 for the party with the largest number of seats and proportionally lower for the parties with less MPs. The second one is the system competitiveness index which will be defined as the scope of the lead in the number of votes obtained in the parliamentary elections by the winning party over the party with the second best result. The last one is the "single equilibrium point" as presented in the coalition formation model developed by Ofek and Meydani (2016).

Likud and the rest?

Likud was created in 1973 as a coalition of revisionist Zionist and liberal parties. Throughout the following decades it has remained one of the two most influential political parties in Israel. Its current leader, Benjamin Netanyahu started his political career in the late eighties. The media-savvy politician led Likud into a new era of politics. His policies garnered both praise and criticism, but most commentators recognized Netanyahu's political effectiveness. On one of the "Time" magazine's covers he was even labelled "King Bibi" (*Time*, May 28, 2012).

Putting aside the media's fascination with the incumbent prime minister we may pose valid questions: has Likud under Benjamin Netanyahu second period of leadership (from 2005 until today) dominated the party system? Has it become the dominant party as Mapai was in the first decades of Israel's independence? One terminological issue needs to be clarified before answering these questions. The category of a system with a "dominant party" is not defined in this paper as Sartori's (2005, pp. 87–103) "predominant-party system"². Within the framework of his theory Israel's democracy should obviously still be described as a polarized multi-party system. The "dominance" of the party is defined here as Sartori's "center positioning," a situation in which one party's relative strength (coalition indispensability and potential of intimidation) is far greater than the relative strength of any other³.

¹ All the information about election results are retrieved from the Knesset official website: https://knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_res.htm.

² A party system in which "one party governs alone without being subjected to alternation".

³ For the discussion on "dominant party" category see Dunleavy 2010.

The sheer number of parliamentary seats obtained by Likud in the thirteen parliamentary elections from 1973 to 2015 suggests that this hypothesis is false. Between 1973 and 1982 the party won from 30 to 37% of the votes and 39 to 48 mandates. Three parliamentary elections in the nineties brought a considerable drop in the Likud's results (25, 25 and 14%; 32, 32 and 19 seats). Putting aside the 2006 elections after the party's split, the situation hasn't changed significantly in the 21st century. In the elections of 2003, 2009, 2013 and 2015 Likud gained the support of respectively 29, 22, 23 and 23% of the voters which translated into 38, 27, 31 and 30 Knesset seats. Therefore, we can distinguish two separate periods of the Likud's election performance: 1970s and 1980s when the support was over 30% and the subsequent phase with the support decreasing to 20–30% (except for two cases when it was lower).

Two facts are important in this context. First, the long premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu in the last 9 years has taken place in the second period, the period of the relatively lower support for Likud. Second, there is no significant difference in the results of Likud from the last 9 years and the previous years (1992–2009) when the right-wing party was far less successful in securing the post of prime minister. It indicates that the strength of the Likud's parliamentary representation is not a main reason for its continuous staying in power. We should also note that during its period of dominance, Mapai and coalitions led by it gathered in elections between 32% and 46% of the votes – notably more than Likud in the recent years.

Also, the data on the effective number of the parties (ENP) doesn't support the hypothesis of Likud becoming a dominant party. The ENP index is an attempt to approximate how many "viable", "important" or "real" parties are part of the political rivalry in the parliament (Goloso 2010, p. 171). The greater the ENP number is, the stronger and/or more numerous rivals of the party with the highest number of seats are. From its establishment until the 1990s Likud functioned in the party system with the ENP below 5. The number grew remarkably after the direct elections for prime minister had been introduced. Even after they were abolished (after the elections in 2001) the ENP remained high (Figure 2). During the time of Benjamin Netanyahu's long premiership, the ENP was over 6. It is one of the highest results for democracies in the world (Goloso 2011, pp. 134–138).

Figure 1. The effective number of parties (ENP), 1988–2015

	1988	1992	1996	1999	2003	2006	2009	2013	2015
ENP	4,83	3,89	5,6	8,43	5,2	7,16	6,87	6,7	6,37

Source: author's own elaboration.

The data on the ENP in Israel leads to two observations. First, the relative power of Likud's rivals in the last 9 years has been great. Second, currently the number of these rivals and/or their relative power is greater than it was prior to 1999. It should also be added that during Mapai's dominant period the strength and/or the number of its rivals was lower than it is today for Likud.

The third index that might point at Likud's dominant status is the competitiveness of the system. Figure 2 presents election results for the two parties that won the largest number of seats in Knesset.

Figure 2. Competitiveness of elections in Israel

Elections	Mapai/Alignment	Main opponent
1949	36%	15%
1951	37%	16%
1955	32%	13%
1959	38%	13%
1961	35%	14%
1965	37%	21%
1969	46%	22%
1973	40%	30%

Elections	Likud	Main opponent
2003	29%	14%
2006	9%	22%
2009	22%	22%
2013	23%*	14%
2015	23%	19%
2017, polls	less than 30%	less than 20%

* With Israel Beitenu.

Source: author's own elaboration.

The first table shows the results from the period of Mapai's dominance. The party's or its electoral coalition's lead over the second strongest party (General Zionists, Herut, Gahal, Likud) is respectively 22, 21, 19, 25, 21, 16, 24 and 10 percentage points (the last result is a clear sign of Mapai losing its grip over the party system). The competitiveness indexes during the time of Netanyahu's long premiership (i.e. lead of Likud over its main opponent) are zero, nine and four percentage points⁴. It is clear that the margin by which Likud holds a position of advantage over the other parties is nothing close to the situation in the first

⁴ The opinion polls shouldn't be considered as data with the importance (and credibility) close to real results presented above, but most of the surveys from 2017 seem to indicate the situation hasn't changed significantly. They suggest Likud's lead is less than 10 percentage points. Some of the polls from January 2018 show a change of leader with Yesh Atid's support slightly higher than Likud's.

three decades of Israel's democracy. In fact, in the elections of 2006 and 2009 Likud gained fewer parliamentary seats than Kadima and its result in the next elections is far from being predictable (unlike in the years 1948–1973 when the success of the dominant party was almost guaranteed).

Taking into consideration the abovementioned indicators, it is highly improbable that the first hypothesis of the paper is correct. It is not completely unthinkable for a party to garner less than 30% of the votes, function in the system characterized by the ENP of over 6, have a lead over the next main opponent of 0 to 10 percentage points and still preserve a dominant status. Nevertheless, it seems extremely unlikely. To further inquire into this issue, the coalition and blackmail potential⁵ of Likud has to be assessed. This leads to the second hypothesis of the paper.

The nationalization of Israeli politics?

Conclusion that Likud's representation in Knesset elections suggests it has not obtained center positioning in the system, does not predetermine the position of the right-wing bloc. To verify the second hypothesis, it is necessary to define what the right-wing bloc is. The essence of the political right-wing and left-wing is an issue of dispute in Israel and elsewhere. Still, these categories play an important role in organizing the research of party systems.

As the importance of the capitalist-socialist divide declined in Israel (Ofek & Meydani 2016, p. 617), the security and foreign policy issues have become the most or one of the most pronounced indicators of the political inclination of parties. Shamir, Dvir-Gvirsman and Ventura (2017, pp. 147–152) specify that this issue is the most important component of the voters political identity and parties use this issue to gather support and consolidate their constituency. Also in the international arena the Israeli parties are identified as right- or left-wing based on their stance on the Palestinian case and relations with the Arab states.

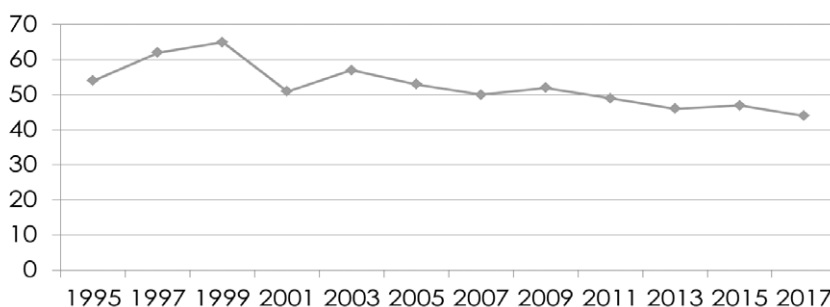
Differentiation between the actual policies of left- and right-wing governments is a challenging task (Doron 2005). While in opposition, Likud tended to harshly criticize the left for an unreasonably appeasing attitude toward Palestinians and Arab states (Shlaim 1996). While in power, it adopted a more moderate policy. To blur the lines between the political camps even more, one can also point to the occasional use of “hawkish”, security-oriented language by the left-wing and center parties in Israel (Perliger & Zaidise 2015, p. 201). Nonetheless they don't form a coherent set of attitudes and stances that are considered vital to their political identity. Thus, we can still claim that the rhetoric of the Israeli right has been closer to Jabotinsky's idea of the Iron Wall against the Arabs than the slogans of the left and center. The most pronounced issue in the security and foreign policy debate is the policy toward Palestinians (including the territorial dispute). Therefore, the right-wing

⁵ To use classic terminology of Sartori (2005, p. 108).

parties will be defined in this paper as parties having an uncompromising approach toward the Palestinians and considering it at the core of their political identity⁶.

As was noted above, some scholars claim that there is a nationalistic swing in the Israeli public which is the reason for the right-wing bloc's success. One of the most publicized indicators of the Israelis' stance on issues of security and foreign policy is the, so called, Negotiation Index. The monthly poll explores attitudes toward peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The Negotiation Index survey is comprised of two questions, one focusing on the public support for peace negotiations and the other on the degree to which the public believes that such talks will actually lead to peace⁷. The data from the polls (Figure 3) confirms that Israeli society has become more right-wing, but the drop in the support for negotiations is not sharp.

Figure 3. Peace negotiations index, 1995–2017



Source: author's own elaboration based on the data from the website, <http://www.peaceindex.org>.

Does this trend translate into the dominance of right-wing parties in the Knesset? In the three elections of the last 9 years the right-wing camp⁸ obtained respectively 65, 61 and 57 parliamentary seats. These results were slightly higher than in the 1990s when it achieved 59, 57 and 54 seats. At the same time, the right-wing parties won an even greater share of the mandates (64, 59, 65) in the 1980s when they shared power with the left. This indicates

⁶ It needs to be mentioned that political cleavages in Israel are multidimensional, so one can argue about other issues being the main axis of the right-left divide. Another important proposal for this axis is a model of Jewish identity.

⁷ The replies to these two questions are calculated, combined, and standardized on a scale of 0–100. The survey is performed throughout the year, the graph presents data from the June surveys.

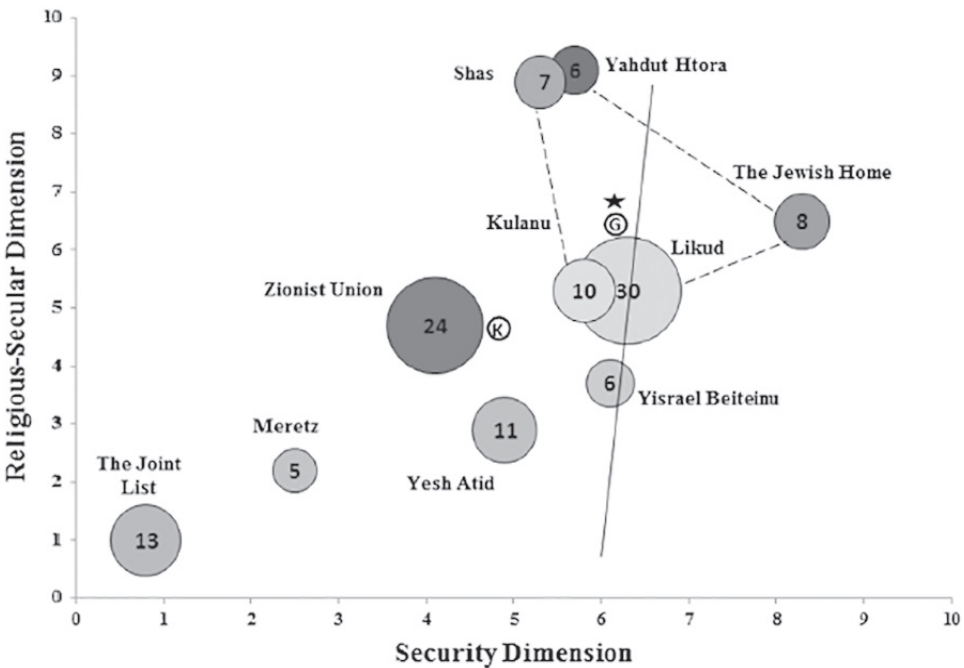
⁸ The following parties will be defined in the paper as right-wing: Likud, Israel Beitenu, Shas, Jewish Home, Tehiya, Tzomet, Moledet, National Religious Party, Agudat Israel and Degel ha-Torah (and their coalitions), Morasha-Poalei Agudat Israel.

that there has been no dramatic upsurge in the support for the nationalistic camp that would bring a qualitative change to the left-right balance.

Currently the Israeli government is comprised of right-wing parties with the exception of Kulanu (which is closer to the center of the political spectrum). Is it the most viable coalition with clear prospects of stability? To answer this question, let's evaluate the model of Ofek and Meydani (2016). According to these authors, the ideological “single equilibrium point” of the Knesset as a whole is further from the arrangements of the coalition agreement than it ever was i.e. current government policy agreement is representing stances of the parties in the Knesset to a lower degree than in any previous Knesset. In other words, the government is significantly more right-wing and pro-religious than the Knesset as a whole. The authors claim that the coalition is stable, because the distance between the Orthodox parties and the parties in opposition is too great (Figure 4). The former wouldn't risk an attempt at forming another coalition which would have to be less right-wing and religious.

Even if we agree with this claim, it doesn't preclude Likud joining the coalition with center-left parties which, according to Ofek and Meydani calculations, are ideologically closer to it than are the Orthodox parties. What is more, still adhering to the authors' quantitative categories, the distance between the current government's stance and the Knesset is over

Figure 4. Map of the distribution of parties in the 20th Knesset (2015)



Source: Ofek & Meydani 2016, p. 619.

40% greater than the distance between any other Knesset and a policy of coalition formed in it. It's hard to assume that this is more than an anomaly. A more probable scenario would be the creation of a government more in line with the Knesset "average" political stances, i.e. less right-wing. And we've already seen that happening. The current government is not an accurate representation of the 9-years of Netanyahu's premiership. The government formed in 2009 temporarily included the Israeli Labor Party and Kadima, the next one had ministers from Ha-Tnu'a. The media also reported secret (and unsuccessful) negotiations between Likud and the Zionist Union to form a grand coalition in 2015 and 2016.

In other words, there is an alternative to a right-wing government. It is also important that the current coalition is not a monolith. The map above shows the ideological distance between the parties included in the Netanyahu's government. How is, or potentially might be, this distance translated into the actual issues of contention in the coalition? To cite just a few: the Supreme Court reform (Likud vs Jewish Home), religious issues (Likud vs United Torah Judaism), media independence (Likud vs Yesh Atid), international pressure on curbing settlement growth (Likud vs Jewish Home), nation-state bill (Likud vs Kulanu). One can contend that every coalition is characterized by internal arguments and a potential center-left government would have had even more profound fault lines. Has Likud got more coalition and blackmail potential than its center (Yesh Atid) and center-left (Zionist Union) contenders?

The map from Figure 4 supports this opinion. Putting aside The Joint List⁹, only Meretz is more distanced from Likud than from its rivals. However, the actual behavior of political parties often follows different paths than the political declarations on which the map is based. Religious parties have been identified with the right-wing camp from at least the nineties, but their political affiliation is a more complex issue. As Doron (2005, p. 35) puts it, Haredi parties "are usually willing to participate and/or even support almost any government policy (from either inside or outside the coalition) in return for the 'right price' to be paid to their communities". Religious parties, both Haredi and religious Zionist were part of right-wing, left-wing and centrist coalitions alike. This practice has functioned from the creation of Israel and also remained intact in the 1990s and 21st century. Nevertheless, it seems that Israel Beitenu, Jewish Home and Haredi parties are more inclined toward the government led by Likud than by center or left-wing parties. The situation is unclear with Kulanu which tends to be closer to the center-left bloc on many issues.

The second hypothesis of the paper doesn't seem to be correct. Emergence of a center-right government is more probable than a center-left one, but it is by no means guaranteed. There is also a significant potential for the creation of a grand coalition that would position itself in the center of the political spectrum. The least probable scenario is the survival of the right-wing government in the long run. Arian and Shamir wrote in 2001 (p. 691) that "the elections of the 1990s do not involve significant and enduring shifts in the strength of the left, the right, or the religious party blocs". The analysis suggests that also in the 21st

⁹ Arab parties are almost always boycotted by the Zionist ones.

century the right wing camp did not manage to achieve dominance that would substantially alter the previous balance of power in the party system.

The third way?

The second potential change in the party system that we might have observed in recent years is the re-emergence of the center parties' sector. Center parties were a relevant part of the party system in the first two decades of Israel's independence, but even then they played a secondary role. Starting from the 1970s their importance diminished even more. They failed to achieve more than one-election success and then disintegrated or joined another party. This was not enough to disrupt the bipolar character of the party system (Goldstein 2011; Lim 2009, pp. 34–37). The elections of 1999 brought to the Knesset new, relatively strong, center parties. It initiated discussions on the possible change to the Israeli party system.

There are opposing opinions on the prospects of the political center's reappearance in Israel. Arian and Shamir (2001, p. 704) suggest that the center parties are short-lived vehicles for the certain politicians to survive political crises. They are formed to provide them with a new start, but soon disappear. Lim (2009) contends that the Israeli party system hinders the emergence of a stable relevant center party. Sandler and Rynhold (2007) allege contrariwise that despite the challenges to the centrism, there is a clear demand for it in the society and a space for it within the party system. Knoller (2004, p. 93) adds that the Shinui party's success suggests that we perceive "a shift from voting for security, tradition and patriotism to voting for personal and cultural identity, quality of life".

Among the parties that passed the threshold in the elections between 1999 and 2015, there were 7 that will be defined in the paper as centrist. Following the approach described above, the criterion for labelling the party as centrist is its stance on the issues of security and foreign policy. In this regard, there are two types of center parties. The ones that position themselves between the traditional right- and left-wing approach to the relations with Arabs (Center Party, Kadima, Ha-Tnuah) and ones that consider this issue as peripheral to their political agenda (Shinui, Gil, Yesh Atid, Kulanu).

To verify the validity of the third hypothesis, the election results of these parties need to be examined. In the 6 elections held between 1999 and 2015 the center parties won respectively 12 (Center Party, Shinui), 15 (Shinui), 36 (Kadima, Gil), 28 (Kadima), 27 (Kadima, Ha-Tnuah, Yesh Atid) and 26¹⁰ (Yesh Atid, Kulanu, Ha-Tnuah) mandates. If we put aside the specific case of the one-time success of Gil party obtaining 7 seats in the elections of 2006¹¹, the political center has held 26 to 29 Knesset seats for the last 12 years. The latest

¹⁰ The last number from the 2015 elections include 5 members of Ha-Tnuah that got to the Knesset from the center-left joint electoral list for the Zionist Union.

¹¹ Gil, or The Pensioners Party in English, was created in the 1990s, but made it to the Knesset only

polls confirm that the support for the center parties hasn't diminished. All of the 5 center parties functioning in the years 2006–2018 have had a coalition potential. In each of the 4 governments that functioned during this period at least one of the center parties was present (Kadima in 2 governments, the rest of the parties in 1 of the governments).

This data strongly indicates that there is a new, centrist sector of the Israeli party system. The electoral performance of the parties that it is comprised of suggests stability of the trend. At the same time we need to distinguish between the stability of the center sector's position in the party system (i.e. in relation to the left- and right-wing camps) and its internal volatility. The case of Kadima is evocative. It was the largest faction in two Knessets (2006, 2009), just to be reduced to 2 MKs in 2013 and none in the current parliament.

Another issue worth considering is whether the transformation of the party system's structure also affected its political agenda? There is a dispute in political science about center parties' agenda. Is it a unique ideological platform different from left- or right-wing or is it just a middle ground between them? If the former is correct, we may ask: did center parties introduce new issues to the political debate? If we agree with the latter opinion, we still can inquire as to whether the center parties' re-emergence has changed the previous balance between the left and right agendas.

Kadima had combined a market and a welfare economy platform, presented secular slogans, but concentrated mainly on the issues of security and foreign policy. It occupied a center position on this spectrum, advocating unilateral disengagement from part of the Palestinian territories (Lim 2009, pp. 37–38; Hazan 2008, pp. 48–51). Ha-Tnuah formed by the Kadima ex-leader Tzipora (Cipi) Livni (Gerstenfeld 2015, p. 179) shared these positions. Also the Center Party presented a platform that included moderate views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and attracted politicians and voters associated with both Likud and Labour (Torgovnik 2001). Shinui built its success on the issue of state-religion relations. It became the strongest proponent of secularism promising to fight religious coercion (Torgovnik 2004; Knoller 2004, pp. 77–78). Gil was a single-issue party advocating the rights and interests of the senior citizens. The last two center parties, Yesh Atid and Kulanu, focused on the socio-economic agenda and emphasized the need to improve the condition of the middle class (Orkibi 2016, p. 575).

The in-depth analysis of the new center parties' platforms is beyond the scope of this paper, but we may summarize this short description of their political agendas. They revolve around three core issues: peace, secularism and social justice (mainly for the secular middle class). None of them is new to the public debate. These are issues that have been advocated before also by the Israeli left. Obviously, the details changed: the peace efforts now also include unilateral disengagement, the socio-economic dimension includes slogans used during the 2011 protests, secularist demands are more pronounced. But none of these is beyond the center-left discourse. Besides, also Israeli Labour Party has adjusted its platform

do adapt to the new realities. For example, it supported the unilateral disengagement from Gaza in 2004 and included leader of the social protests Stav Shaffir on its electoral list in 2015.

In this sense, we may still claim, that the change to the party system in Israel wasn't really significant. Likud and parties further right of it still hold around half of the mandates. Another half belongs to the center-left (or center and left) parties (including Arab parties) just as it has been from the late 1970s. The change only affected the structure of the center-left camp. The support for the senior left-wing parties shrank, creating the space for the center parties. Their political demands and proposals did not significantly differ from the ones formulated in the past by the center-left camp. At the same time, the emergence of new parties provided the center-left agenda with a new face. Thus, the rearrangement of the center-left sector of the political scene may be seen as part of the anti-establishment tendency noticeable in many Western democracies today. Unlike in several European countries, in Israel the new players limiting influence of the senior parties do not provide an ideological alternative, but just a sense of renewal and (a partial) exchange of the elites. The new center parties do not refrain from forming coalitions with the right-wing bloc which some interpret as changing the party system's balance to the advantage of the right-wing camp. But broad governments are not a new phenomenon. The left-wing parties have a long and rich history of partaking in the creation of grand coalitions in Israel.

Conclusions

The paper was aimed at verifying whether the previous model of balanced bipolar competition within the Israeli party system has transformed. Conclusions of the three hypotheses' assessment will be divided into separate paragraphs each dealing with one of them.

Likud is the most relevant party within the Israeli party system, but it is far from achieving a dominant status. Its relative strength is not embedded in the rise of the support for the party which is considerably lower than in the 1970s and 1980s and is similar to the results in the 1990s. The first reason for Likud's advantage over other parties is the fragmentation of the system. Likud has retained the size of its parliamentary share, but the effective number of parties rose, which weakened the left camp. The second reason is the slightly higher coalition potential of Likud that stems from its position between center-left and far-right sectors of the party system. Likud has better prospects for forming a coalition with Israel Beiteinu and Orthodox parties which gives it an advantage over the center-left parties, but not a dominance in the party system.

The right-wing bloc did not manage to break the bipolarity of the party system and dominate it. The number of Knesset seats obtained by right-wing parties in 21st century is not higher than it was in the 1980s. The current right-wing government is not uniform, the agenda of the parties in it is divergent to a great degree and tensions within the coalition are

strong. The coalition potential of the center-left parties is lower than Likud's¹², but the latter's advantage is not great enough to exclude the possibility of a center-left wing government. Even more probable is a grand coalition including both center-left and center-right parties. Thus, the system maintained its previous form.

The center-left sector of the party system split. The senior left-wing parties survived, but their share of the mandates in the parliament reduced. This political gap has been stably occupied for the last 12 years by the new center parties. They position themselves between the traditional right and left and win in the successive elections over 20% of the votes. This is a most noticeable change of the Israeli party system, but at the same time it's not fundamental. First, their political agenda remains within the scope of the previous left-center discourse. Second, the fact that they also form coalitions with the right-wing parties isn't new conduct for the center-left camp. Third, the balance of power between the bloc containing Likud and the far-right parties on the one side and the rest of the party system on the other – hasn't been altered. The change pertains only to the structure of the latter (the weakening of Israeli Labour Party, the emergence of center parties). In this sense, we can still see the Israeli party system as a bipolar balance with a minor tilt in the favor of the right.

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¹² Similarly to the situation in the 1980s (Arian & Shamir, p. 693–694).

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